A Classic Case of Caste Discrimination: Laxman Singh vs. Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of Arts and Aesthetics

Caste-based discrimination persists in India's higher education, even within institutions that publicly champion progressive values. The Laxman Singh case from Jawaharlal Nehru University's (JNU) School of Arts and Aesthetics (SAA) remains one of the most cited examples of how opaque processes, arbitrary scoring, and elitist biases can exclude marginalized students while favoring privileged ones. Similar patterns of discrimination have been reported across other schools at JNU, affecting not only Dalit and Adivasi students but also minorities and economically disadvantaged groups.

Background: JNU and the School of Arts and Aesthetics

JNU is renowned as a leading center for humanities and social sciences in India. The School of Arts and Aesthetics specializes in advanced programs covering film studies, visual arts, performing arts, and related fields. Reservation policies for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) exist, yet students from these backgrounds often report systemic hurdles—especially in MPhil and PhD admissions. These include consistently low viva voce marks, minimal Dalit/Adivasi faculty presence, and curricula that frequently marginalize perspectives from oppressed castes.

The Core Allegation: Discriminatory Viva Voce Scoring

During the 2006–07 MPhil admission cycle, Laxman Singh—an SC candidate and MA graduate from the same SAA department—excelled in the written entrance exam. However, the viva voce panel awarded him only **2 out of 30 marks**.

In sharp contrast, several general-category candidates, some lacking any prior background in arts and aesthetics, received exceptionally high scores. Notably, **Amit Parmeshwaran**, grandson of E.M.S. Namboodiripad (Kerala's first communist Chief Minister), was given a perfect **30 out of 30**. Reports from the period indicate that **no SC or ST candidate scored above 18 marks**, while many privileged general-category applicants received 24 or higher, with a few achieving full marks.

Laxman Singh pursued clarification through Right to Information (RTI) queries, but the interview board declined to provide any reasoned explanation or engage with the evident disparities.

Another Instance of Discrimination: The Case of Muqbil Ahmar

Discriminatory practices in viva voce evaluations extend beyond the School of Arts and Aesthetics to other departments at JNU, affecting minority students as well. In 2007, Muqbil Ahmar, a Muslim student and now a journalist working for the Times of India group in Mumbai (as Executive Editor for ETCIO at The Economic Times), faced similar bias during his MPhil admission interview.

Ahmar, described as a very bright scholar, held a Master's in English from JNU's School of Languages, Literature and Culture Studies. He scored an impressive **53 out of 70 marks** in the written entrance exam. Despite this strong performance, he was awarded only **3 out of 30 marks** in the interview, effectively barring him from admission.

In response to this injustice, Ahmar pasted pamphlets across the JNU campus highlighting the incident and protesting the discriminatory marking, drawing attention to the systemic biases against minorities and marginalized groups in the university's admission processes.

Manipulation of Eligibility Norms

In the Laxman Singh case, the official prospectus required a Master's degree specifically in Arts and Aesthetics or its core branches (e.g., film studies, visual arts, dramatics, or performing arts). Faculty members, however, reportedly expanded the interpretation—without formal announcement—to include unrelated humanities fields like political science, linguistics, or pedagogy. This shift facilitated admissions for candidates from non-relevant disciplines while disadvantaging qualified internal reserved-category students like Singh, who fulfilled the original criteria but were undermined by abysmal viva scores.

The Paradox of “Progressive” Faculty and Elitist Attitudes

A troubling dimension of these cases involves faculty who publicly identify as leftist and progressive. Prominent professors such as **Ranjani Mazumdar** and **Ira Bhaskar** position themselves as committed to social justice and progressive ideals. Yet the department has faced repeated accusations of exhibiting **casteist as well as elitist attitudes**. This includes awarding near-perfect or perfect marks to candidates from elite, upper-caste, or politically connected families—while assigning disproportionately low scores not only to SC/ST/OBC students but also to **non-English-speaking upper-caste poor students** from disadvantaged or regional backgrounds.

Such patterns are said to reflect a culture of snobbery and elitism, where fluency in English, urban sophistication, and social networks often outweigh academic merit or adherence to reservation principles. The perfect score for Amit Parmeshwaran exemplifies how caste and class privilege can prevail, even under the guise of leftist rhetoric.

Legal Challenge and Institutional Autonomy

Singh contested the process in court, alleging violations of reservation norms, arbitrary scoring, and discriminatory eligibility changes. The matter reached the Delhi High Court (LPA No. 268/2008). JNU defended its decisions by stressing institutional autonomy and faculty discretion in evaluations. The court ruled in the university's favor, finding insufficient direct evidence of malice in the specific instance and affirming universities' broad latitude in admissions.

Although the judgment did not substantiate the discrimination claims, the case ignited broader discussions on how "autonomy" can sometimes insulate biased practices that are hard to prove legally due to their subjective nature.

Lasting Significance

The Laxman Singh episode, along with cases like that of Muqbil Ahmar, endures as a stark illustration of casteism and minority discrimination in Indian academia. It exposes how self-proclaimed progressive environments can reproduce exclusion through discretionary powers, depress viva scores for reserved and minority candidates, and extend elitist biases even toward poor upper-caste students lacking English proficiency or elite networks. The glaring disparity—perfect marks for the grandson of a communist icon versus abysmal scores for SC/ST and Muslim aspirants—continues to highlight entrenched hierarchies masquerading as merit or ideology.

Addressing these issues demands transparent viva processes, diverse panels, mandatory reasoned scoring, and real accountability to ensure reservations and equity policies deliver genuine access in elite spaces like JNU.